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Taking leave

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Gair Dunlop

Taking Leave: art and closure



Fig. 1: stripped control tower, RAF Coltishall. June 2008. Copyright author.

After the removal of the radar and flight control equipment, the sole occasional occupant of the control tower was a security guard.

Introduction

Taking Leave: a process of departure, an invocation of the right to leisure, and a sense of the end of a phase of life.

All of these definitions have some purchase in the analysis of UK military sites that have become run-down, redundant, and abandoned. The process of abandonment can stir deep emotional responses in personnel, surrounding residents (most recently at RAF Leuchars, in the process of drawdown and transfer to the Army) and in elements of the wider public. Site closures are occasions when the mobilisation of memory becomes a shared process, engaging civilian and military populations. The role of film and photography in commemorative events in military culture is well understood institutionally. Military unit photographers accompany royal visits, passing-out parades, disbandments and a wide variety of formal occasions. Media training, press officers and an active Public Relations organisation produce many contexts for image-making on bases. Displays, parades, speeches and dances are held; these events have a public face and are widely reported, drawing on local media and publics to share the specificity of the site and its histories. Unusually, in the case of the drawdown and closure of RAF Coltishall in North Norfolk, three contemporary digital artists were invited in to document the site, the personnel and behaviours around withdrawal from one of the RAF's most iconic sites.

Planned in 1936 with construction beginning in 1938, Coltishall was originally intended as a bomber station, with a typical 'Expansion Period' design based around three large hangars in a curve at the edge of concrete apron, leading onto a grass airfield. Elements of the design were planned by Edward Lutyens, with a spacious and elegant consideration of accommodation and infrastructure. After heavy RAF losses over France in the early period of WW2, Coltishall was redesignated as a fighter defence station in June 1940, and continued as a fighter interception station throughout the Cold War period, flying Javelins and Lightnings. Its final aircraft, the reconnaissance and ground attack Jaguar, entered service in 1974 and continued until the last aircraft left for RAF Coningsby in Lincolnshire on the 3rd April 2006.¹ Generations of aircraft and personnel associated this airfield with the historical high point of the RAF, and its relatively unmodified condition made it easy to imaginatively connect with the high days of wartime drama. This unmodified condition also meant that the station was effectively doomed once the Jaguar became obsolete. The communications, electronics, and work spaces could not be rescaled for more modern aircraft. Accordingly, attempts were made to find new uses for the airfield. A freight hub

adjunct to Norwich Airport was floated, but road links were poor. A rather fanciful eco-settlement was proposed by developers Barton Willmore², and initial interest was shown by long-established Norwich printers Jarrold and Sons in relocating. The first chill winds of recession meant that these plans came to nothing. The sole re-use of the enclosed site to date is the renovation and re-purposing of the Enlisted Men's quarters as H.M. Prison Bure, (operational from 2009) with its attendant security features. The housing stock, outside the perimeter fence, has been renamed "Badersfield" after the notable WW2 pilot, and is mainly private family housing with some renting. Most recent developments are as a consequence of the site purchase by Norfolk District Council, who plan to lease it as a solar energy generation site while preserving its architectural and historical features.³

1. Artists strategies in military environments

Methodologies evolving between contemporary visual artists and cultural geographers are bringing new perspectives to bear on landscape studies and lived experience. Curator Nato Thompson has coined the phrase 'Experimental Geography' to describe this emerging field, seen as "a new lens to interpret a growing body of culturally inspired work that deals with human interaction with the land."⁴

Jane and Louise Wilson's "Gamma" film project⁵, for example, looks at the former Greenham Common cruise missile storage facility as an iconic site, one where irreconcilable beliefs around safety, security and the future clashed and still carry resonance.

Artists and artists groups such as The Centre for Land Use Interpretation⁶, Trevor Paglen⁷, and the Wilsons share a practice of art production which explores 'spectacles in space' and enable us to reflect on the sides of our social organism which lie hidden in plain sight.

Strategies developed by the Artists Placement Group⁸, where artists became involved in industry and in state organisations, are key precedents in my own practice. Invitations, not commissions, were the core of its procedures. Industry partners were not to expect specific outcomes or illustrative addenda to their productions. The artist's presence in and engagement with the organisation was as an 'incidental person' who, Latham argues, "may be able, given access to matters of public interest ranging from the national economic, through the environmental and departments of the administration to the ethical in social orientation, to 'put forward answers to questions we have not yet asked'."⁹

The artist in this context is someone whose presence is authorized but not bound by a particular role in management or utilitarian daily structure, who can act as a catalyst for discussion and reflection on the histories and outcomes of the military site, as seen from its surviving facilities and the surrounding communities.

In the case of the RAF Coltishall project, the freedom to wander between different operational facilities at will was matched by the ability to enter Officer's Mess, Sergeant's Mess and other ranks facilities. (After some deliberation, it was decided by the Base Commander that the artists should however dine in the Sergeant's Mess). The impending redundancy of the aircraft flown from Coltishall (Sepecat Jaguar) itself added to the scope for freedom of movement. As an aircraft in active service since 1971 there were no associated restricted areas or secret processes to be negotiated. On the other hand, this also meant that it was problematic to extrapolate findings and elements of filmed behaviours to more contemporary airfields and airframe support communities. Informal cross-referencing of observations between obsolete and current practice became possible with visits to RAF Marham during the four year course of engagement with Coltishall. RAF culture seemed consistent, levels of secrecy and access however were more tightly constrained.

Three artists (myself, Louise K. Wilson and Angus Boulton) were invited by English Heritage onto the RAF Coltishall base in North Norfolk over a period of 4 years, from the early stages of its closure programme until after the gates were locked and future uses had been partly decided. All three artists involved in the Coltishall project had a personal relationship to militarised space, whether through family history or campaign activism. This personal interest was re-stimulated in different ways during the initial period of site access. Visual, sonic, and digital arts practices can be seen as magpie methodologies, hybrid forms of knowledge and information gathering. All three artists involved in the project had to approach the personnel and the environment through the prism of what was already understood about the meaning and economies of the image on RAF sites, and then try to push that understanding and the concomitant results a bit further. Coltishall, as the last functioning fighter interception airfield from the Battle of Britain era, carried enormous resonance as a birthplace of RAF traditions.

My participation was down to co-incidence; the interest on the part of English Heritage stemmed from a site-specific artwork I had made in the area the year previously. "Vulcan: sublime, melancholic" was a full-size line drawing of a Vulcan nuclear bomber, etched by light exclusion onto the lawn of Bolwick Hall, near Aylsham¹⁰. Alluding to both the tradition of

regimental markings on rural hillsides and the miniature siege works constructed by the obsessive Uncle Toby in Sterne's 'Tristram Shandy', the work also made reference to the linkages between rural estate and military airfield and the occluded histories of the Cold War V force, spread throughout the Eastern Counties of England. An invitation to document this artwork from the air, extended by Wing Commander Willie Cruickshank at the nearby Coltishall base, was my first encounter with the pilots; they had noticed and identified the drawing, and were intrigued and curious as to its meaning. Their identification of the work with the regimental carving tradition opened up a mutual ground for discussion on meaning of the work, and care to cultivate multiple interpretation was key to the later work.



Fig.2: '*Vulcan: sublime, melancholic*' viewed from the air, piloted by Wing Commander Willie Cruickshank, RAF Coltishall. June 2004

Discussion between the three artists began to focus on ways in which forces acting on the site and on the personnel experiencing a range of emotions (loss, nostalgia, uncertainty) were articulated through formal ceremony, small individual mark-making, and major structural changes. An important part of the work was getting a sense of the 'technological

imaginary' which motivated the personnel, and ways in which official imagery, a sense of nature and of nation fed this sense of place for the institution and its participants. As a result of this process, I was able to develop three artworks from the engagement with the airbase.

I will suggest that a 'toolkit' based around four conceptualisations became a useful framework of practice for the project, helping focus attention on changes and continuities as the site evolved and the relation of the RAF to its past and its future in both local and strategic terms changed.

Sign into Abstraction refers to the changing qualities of signs and functional objects, which become enigmatic over time as personnel familiar with their functionality recede. This process became key to my main photographic production on site.

Green world/closed world dualism refers to the combination of tranquility and alertness embodied by the rural fighter interception network, which was particularly intense at Coltishall due to its history. Pastoral, technological, networked and entropic tendencies all combined into a very particular genus loci. These elements are also useful in consideration of landscapes of training, as for instance in the work of Patrick Wright¹¹. This conceptual key informed my observational video work "Dispersals."

Mirroring as Geography refers to the disposition of individual sites in a Cold War system where each side reflects the other, sometimes in surprisingly exact ways. Former Russian airfields in East Germany echo the architectures and design of NATO facilities in a extraordinary super-symmetry. This became a key focus of Angus Boulton's work on site.

Mirroring as Simulation refers to the virtual airfield and missions conducted in the Jaguar Flight simulator, operated as a privatized concern by Thales Defence contractors and staffed by former RAF personnel. This became the cornerstone of my short twinscreen film exploring the paradoxical nostalgias available in a virtual Coltishall "Simulator/Realtime."

Is the 'imaginary life' of airfields, research centres etc. - as embodied in film and popular culture- a help or a hindrance in exploring such places? My argument is that they are unavoidable, and a consideration of the 'aura' of such sites is an important part of understanding their enduring effects. Second World war drama is a shared cultural experience, almost over-familiar. By contrast, the Cold War as lived experience is more

distant. The end of a runway in itself is a banal place; it is only with the cultural weight of cinematic apocalypse that they become hugely charged places in a war that exists primarily in the imagination. There follows a section in which each of the four 'toolkit elements' is illustrated.



fig.3 Runway 22 end, May 2006

2. Documenting drawdown

Sign into abstraction



fig.4 "Return to ESA" a spent cartridge safe on the firing range, RAF Coltishall. *The enigmatic nature of many military objects approaches the condition of abstraction for the uninitiated.*

It might be thought that a military airfield would be drab and colourless. On the contrary, such militarised landscapes are modernist environments par excellence. Typically they consist of an interlocking series of utilitarian structures, where highly codified behavioural cues prevail. Large and small coloured shapes in paint - both on the walls and on the ground - serve to delineate zones of activity, indicate access and emergency exit points, and

modulate behaviour. The imagination is immediately engaged through an intense curiosity and effort to match our received ideas with the reality around us. These highly practical signs - or icons in the structuralist worldview - were immediately understood and acted upon by all trained personnel. As RAF Coltishall closed, and equipment was removed, the signs and indicators remained. With fewer people who understood their meaning, the images drifted from purposeful signification into bold abstraction. Airfield arrestor markers, for example, became bold pop art placards. Photographed in series, the range of marks, objects and surfaces serve to remind us of how much of the daily environment we take for granted. A shift into redundancy brings the surfaces forward in a new light. The first resulting artwork from my Coltishall experiences was a sequence of medium format photographs, working to explore the space as a liminal zone where meaning and function were drifting away, while natural forces of decay and erosion were creeping forward. The cultural memory is informed by the work and writings of war artists such as Paul Nash (*Aerial Creatures*, 1944¹²), and by the literary insights of writers such as Rex Warner (*The Aerodrome*, 1941¹³).



fig.5 Arrestor marker, runway 04, June 2008



Fig.6 Briefing Room, RAF Coltishall. Photo by the author.



Fig.7 Briefing room projection windows. Author photo.



Fig.8 Ivy invading dispersals blast wall

Green World/Closed World

Military landscapes in the UK, annexed from a rural hinterland, embody elements of idyll and dystopia. The sense of idyll and the sense of high-tech alertness need to balance in order to make such places function. An interesting analogy to these states of mind was elaborated by Canadian cultural critic Northrop Frye (1957), with his concepts of 'green world' and 'closed world' dramas. The green world represents a space outside normal time and social rules where the rigidities of order can be overcome, subverted or at least ameliorated. As a structuring metaphor, these concepts have been deployed by cultural theorist and historian

of technology Paul N. Edwards. In relation to computing and structural metaphors of Cold War confrontation, the 'closed world' is one of Manichean struggle, all or nothing strategies, and perpetual mobilization.

A "closed world" is a radically bounded scene of conflict, an inescapably self referential space where every thought, word, and action is ultimately directed back toward a central struggle. It is a world radically divided against itself. Turned inexorably inward, without frontiers or escape, a closed world threatens to annihilate itself, to implode. (Ref xxxx:xx)

Meanwhile:

The green world is an unbounded natural setting such as a forest, meadow, or glade. Action moves in an uninhibited flow between natural, urban, and other locations and centers around magical, natural forces—mystical powers, animals, or natural cataclysms....The green world is indeed an "open" space where the limits of law and rationality are surpassed. Ref xxxx:xx)

These two mindsets are usually seen as opposites, but they co-exist in military and state controlled land such as test sites, experimental facilities, and training grounds where the 'normal world' is held at a distance. The idyll for RAF personnel can be seen as an intimate relation to the past, but also as a more agreeable companion emotion to the boredom of waiting, in the context of the infinitely postponed decisive moment of Cold War era conflict. Reverie, alertness, instant response and a deep sense of historical continuity formed a constellation of feeling and allegiance at RAF Coltishall.

The Green World and the Closed World function as two poles of dramaturgical theory; the mental arenas which we keep in our heads as part of our 'technological imaginary'. The Cold war combined stasis with instantaneity, the idea of the generic England being protected becoming entwined with the retrogressive and rural.



fig.9: rehearsals for closure parade, RAF Coltishall. Summer 2006

fig.10: last unit photograph, engine workshop, RAF Coltishall Summer 2006.

Both of these photographs are stills from 'Dispersals' an observational documentary. The presence of a vast workforce is receding from everyday life in the UK, and the ways in which departure was marked brought to mind some of the earliest uses of film and photographic media. The long line of personnel leaving a practice parade was strongly evocative of very early film footage of staff leaving factories and shipyards. During the course of the slow closure, visits were made at key times, and filmic notice taken of the preparations for the final closure rituals. The seeming informality of pilot discussions on formation flying contrasted strongly with the relentless drilling by parade sergeants for the other ranks. The humour of these events, not often noted, was foregrounded.

GeoMirroring as Geography

Mirroring has been a guiding principle in the onsite work of Angus Boulton and myself. Boulton is concerned with the historical and geographic mirroring involved in the balance of terror. Previous projects have included *Cood Bay Forst Zinna* ¹⁴, a video exploration of an abandoned site, the *raison d'être* of which is unclear. The viewer is disorientated: is this a sports camp? An abandoned holiday centre? Traverses through birch woods, drained swimming pools and sports grounds are suddenly disrupted by a discarded tank track or guardhouse. Rich layers of association are gradually built up, until we see the hermetic camp for what it really is: a frozen self-contained world containing the evidence of its own erasure from geopolitics and memory. The viewer eventually realizes that this camp is an

abandoned Red Army enclave in the Brandenburg Forest, abandoned at the end of the Cold War.

At Coltishall, Boulton has been able to make video which echoes and mirrors material from former East Germany and Poland. Uneasy questions arise about equivalence, morality, and the mutual interdependency of two supposedly antagonistic military blocks.¹⁵

Mirroring as Simulation

Piecemeal privatisations have left many seemingly military structures and resources under the control of corporate entities. In this case, the prime example of relevance to the project outcome was the privatization of the Jaguar Simulator facility, controlled by Thales, a French-based multinational. Most of its personnel were ex-UK military; head of unit Clive Crouch for example was a former Vulcan pilot. This aspect of the airbase offered the opportunity for the third of my works: "Simulator/Realtime."

The final decision to ground the last two Jaguar squadrons (6 and 41) had not yet been taken. The frail, leaky aircraft were transferred north. Pilots accordingly drove back to Coltishall from RAF Coningsby in Lincolnshire for simulator training. World War 3, Middle East invasion, and Balkans crises continued to take place on a regular basis in a nondescript industrial building on the Coltishall site. It had been decided that it was uneconomic to move the facility, with its screens, projectors, computer servers and control room.



Fig 11 "Simulator/realtime digital video still, 9 minute artwork by the Author"¹⁶

Unhappy with the move, and conscious of the imminent withdrawal of their aircraft from service, pilots still insisted on 'flying' from Coltishall. Dressed in full nuclear/chemical suits, they sweated their way through engine failures, missile attack, refueling scenarios and attack runs. Carefree about airfield safety, pilots would careen across the 'grass', squeeze through impossible gaps between buildings, and show a general disregard for normal rules. Outside, as the base completed its closure, structures were uprooted, signs taken down, and more buildings were sealed. The virtual Coltishall of the simulator became increasingly more 'functional' and homely than the real one. The electronic half-dome presented the pilots' with an opportunity to hold on to their lost home for a little longer.



Fig 12

My response to this paradoxical nostalgia became a re-simulation of the pilot's carefree progress: following in a car to as great an extent as possible the freedom of the simulator in journeying round the base. The two sequences were then time-mapped together, and the relative sparseness of the real-world airbase became highly visible. The pilot's nostalgia made sense.

The engineers, guards and ground personnel are left with more prosaic forms of memory and mark-leaving. The wall art and graffiti became all that remains on site of a multi-billion pound aircraft programme, marked by photographic recording.



Fig. 13 wall graffiti, RAF Coltishall. Photo by the author

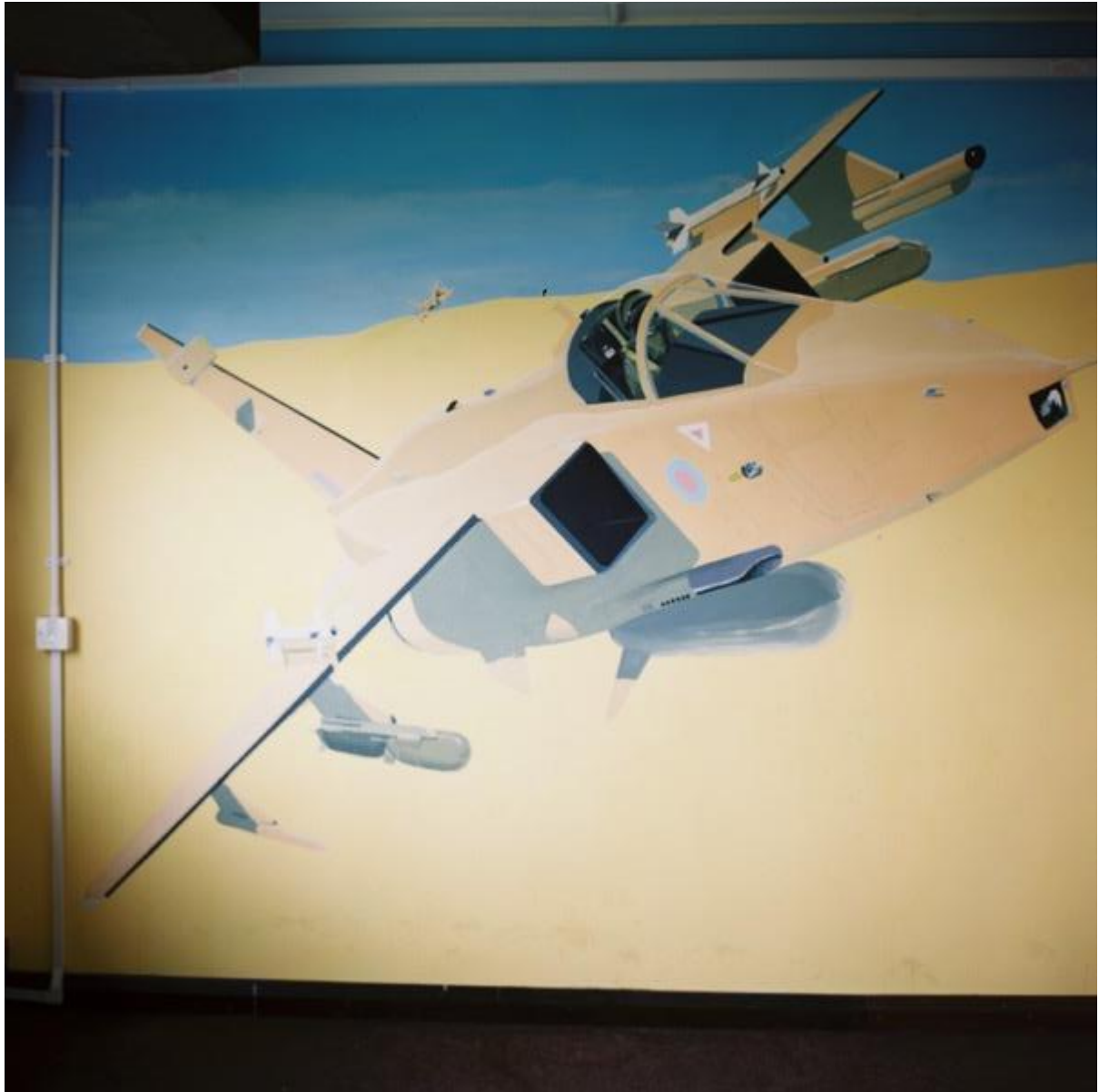


Fig.14 Wall painting , 6 Sqdn Hangar RAF Coltishall. Photo by the author

Conclusion: edge effects

As the final closedown came nearer, base personnel became increasingly focused on the closure parade and flypast. It was clear that this display was to function as an internal marker; the public were invited, but the meaning and emotional resonance of the departure was to be marked for the RAF itself. Video observation and recording of behavior on site became inflected by an awareness of this significance.

On the day of closure, blessings and speeches paused. Eyes scanned the horizon. Dots appeared, and suddenly a wave of noise and vibration swept the field. A formation of low-flying aircraft had gone, almost before fully seen. Cameras and binoculars wobbled uncertainly. The skyful of roaring silver metal was too big to register.

Within the ceremonial context, punctuation of parade formality by an explosive irruption of noise and awe fulfill a key role. The 'technological Sublime' can be seen as a method by which military units mark their great moments.

Concepts of 'the Sublime' as a category of experience derive from aesthetic theory, in particular Romantic Landscape conceptions of beauty, wildness, excess and fear. The 'Technological Sublime' is a concept elaborated by David E Nye (1996) ¹⁷from an original idea by Leo Marx. Whereas the natural sublime is posited as an experience of 'agreeable terror' or an experience where potential loss of self-hood faced with the immensities of nature is resolved, the technological sublime is seen as a locus of terror or immensity experienced in the face of man-made environments or spectacular events. Events or sites evoking this emotion become important elements in national identities; the flyover, the dam opening, the bomb test.

Preceded by Hawker Hurricane and escorted by a Typhoon Eurofighter, a 'Diamond nine' formation of Jaguars hurtled over the parade ground and into history. The past and the future - represented by Second World War aircraft and the 'new' Eurofighter - bookended their farewell.

Methodologies and techniques which were developed in response to the RAF Coltishall project have further application in other civil and military contexts. We can approach research questions through a convergence of approaches derived from cultural geography, contemporary arts practice, science studies and history. The four polarities which contributed to analysis (sign/abstraction, green world/closed world, mirroring geographically and mirroring in simulation) offer ways to order and construct a response to closed sites of many kinds.

In particular, a film production methodology brings together the cultural-visual elements of the technological-military imaginary with their consequences as they play out over sites and communities. Questions, tacit knowledge and the otherwise inexpressible can be

externalized and given a tangible form. It is easily graspable by both management granting access and by workforce, retired personnel, witnesses and residents responding to the immediacy of the visual in prompting memory. It enables multiple input, and a flexibility of output format gives a sense of the impossibility of one view being sovereign. Visual research is increasingly being recognized in geography and within the history of science and technology (Gallison 2015¹⁸) and offers a truly interdisciplinary epistemology for knowledge exchange. Drawbacks include the artificiality of assumption that the changes and moments recorded have shared significance beyond the production team.

However, the testing of ways to question and extend understanding of place mean engagement with lived experience. Landscape is at once cause and effect, process and product, material and cultural. Artist as 'incidental person'- someone whose presence is authorized but not part of the management or utilitarian daily structure- acts as a catalyst for discussion and reflection on the histories and outcomes of the military establishment as seen from its surviving facilities and the surrounding communities.

Boundaries and edges between civil and military in institutions such as the UKAEA (United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority) are often porous, blurred, and vague.

If we accept that military strategic requirements for defence industries dispersal in postwar planning are a major factor in national infrastructure, then a vast area of research and visual investigation is open to us. of continuity between a post-war modernity and contemporary anxieties of despoliation, blight, and risk. In The idea of the 'Military-Pastoral Complex' (Flintham, 2012¹⁹) can be extended and interrogated to tease out strands. In addition, a visual sensibility can tease out revealing aspects of the imagery generated by and around technologies in the post-war period, and recombine them using digital tools to make a reflexive experience for the viewer.

Visual arts techniques are ideal tools for investigation in such issues, given that these sites already constitute a collage; of technologies, hierarchies, objects and contested memory.

¹ Station historical references from [Jennings, M.D. \(2007\) *Royal Air Force Coltishall: a station history*. Cowbit, Lincolnshire: Old Forge press](#)

² [Batson, R. *Eco-community vision for RAF Coltishall* Eastern Daily Press 11Sept 2007 \[http://www.edp24.co.uk/news/eco_community_vision_for_raf_coltishall_1_698951\]\(http://www.edp24.co.uk/news/eco_community_vision_for_raf_coltishall_1_698951\)](#)
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³ [RAF Coltishall site £50m solar farm plan approved BBC News 19 December 2014 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-30546048>](#)

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⁴ Thompson, N. *Experimental geography* New York : Independent Curators International, 2008.

⁵ Wilson, J. and Wilson, L. *Gamma* (1999) four projection installation
<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wilson-gamma-t07698/text-summary>

⁶ Holte, M.N. (2006) *The Administrative Sublime, or the Center for Land Use Interpretation* .
Afterall issue 13 See also www.clui.org (accessed 15th feb 2015)

⁷ Paglen, T. (2012) *Geographies of Seeing in Photoworks: Agents of Change* Brighton Photoworks
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⁸ Hudek, A. (2010) *-the incidental person* <http://apexart.org/exhibitions/hudek.htm>

⁹ Latham, J. *The Artist as Incidental Person: new role vis-à-vis government*, John Latham
Archive (JLA) 13/4231, Folder 335.
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¹⁰ Dunlop, G. *Vulcan* (2004) drawing 111ft by 93ft, Bolwick Hall nr. Aylsham online at
<https://vimeo.com/13819937>

¹¹ Wright, P. (1995) *the village that died for England* London: Jonathan Cape

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https://www.flickr.com/photos/gair_dunlop/sets/72157626583252950/

¹³ Warner, W. (1941) *The Aerodrome: a love story* London: John Lane/ Bodley head

¹⁴ Boulton, A. (2007) *Restricted Areas* Manchester: MIRIAD/Manchester Metropolitan
University/The Wapping Project,

¹⁵ Information can be accessed at <http://www.angusboulton.net/0826-2/>

¹⁶ Available at <https://vimeo.com/13819865>

¹⁷ Nye, D.E. (1996) *American Technological Sublime* MIT Press Cambridge, Mass.

¹⁸ Galison, P. *Visual STS in 'Visualisation in the Age of Computerisation'* Routledge 2015

¹⁹ Flintham, M (2012) *The Military Pastoral Complex: contemporary representations of*
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[papers/military-pastoral-complex-contemporary-representations-militarism](http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/military-pastoral-complex-contemporary-representations-militarism)